Context and Importance: A study by Human Equity found the lack of soft skills (such as possessing rigid perspectives and poor negotiating skills) to be among top reasons for poor employee performance (Human Equity, 2009). While all soft skills are important, conflict prevention, management and resolution are essential for job productivity and retention. In a study commissioned by CPP in 2008, 25 percent of surveyed employees said that avoiding conflict led to sickness or absence from work and more than one-third said that conflict resulted in someone leaving the company, either through termination or resignation (CPP, 2008). When conflict is not managed properly, staff becomes less productive, their moral plummets, they take more sick leave, resign or may be terminated, these factors affecting in turn the organization’s ability to fulfill its mission and its bottom line. An employee with few employment options cannot afford to engage in destructive conflict cycles.

Design Challenge: Build a 5-week program focused on increasing the participant’s:

- Job readiness for the hospitality, customer service, and food industries
- Knowledge, skill, and confidence in responding to and managing conflict situations
- Ability to communicate effectively

Audience: CC-Prep “provides the education and skills development that will empower and prepare under-credited adults for post-secondary education success, viable employment and lifelong learning.” CC-Prep website. Students are DC residents aged 18 or older who wish to complete their GED requirements, prepare for post-secondary education, and builds the skills that will allow them to gain living wage jobs. Based on demographic surveys we have conducted, 90% of the students come from large, women led households (4-6 individuals) surviving on a single income well below poverty line. Students are most likely going to be pursuing employment in customer service, hospitality, and the food industry.

Solution: NVMS (the organization I work for) is partnering with Community College Preparatory Academy (CC-Prep) as part of our Community Engaged Training for Employment Results (CENTER). CENTER is designed to meet the soft skill development needs of disadvantaged individuals in the local region, specifically Ward 8 of Washington D.C., by providing conflict resolution and communication skills training as part of CC-Prep’s Job Readiness curriculum.

Focus: Based on information gathered from our partner and their students, as well as my experience as a conflict resolution practitioner and instructional designer, the program will focus as follows:

Session 1 – Fundamental Conflict Resolution Concepts: define conflict, identify sources of conflict and appropriate techniques to address them

Session 2 – Individual Approaches to Conflict: individual conflict styles (competition, collaboration, etc.), analyze how individuals with different styles interact and the impact this has on escalating or de-escalating the conflict, increasing student skill in using all styles of conflict as appropriate to the situation.
**Session 3 – Communication Skills in the Workplace:** learn and practice effective communication skills such as active listening, asking effective questions, summarizing, paraphrasing, reframing, speaking to be heard.

**Session 4 – Resolving Conflict in the Workplace:** learn and practice a 4 step model for resolving conflicts – listen to understand, identify issues, problem-solve, agree - that arise in the workplace with/among co-workers, supervisors, clients, etc.

**Session 5 – Holding Difficult Conversations:** learn and practice a 4 step model – Observation, Feeling, Need, Request - for holding difficult conversations around performance, behavior, and other sensitive topics that may arise, and how to manage strong emotions.

**Format:** 3-hour long, in-person sessions delivered once a week for 5 consecutive weeks.

**Linking Theory and Practice**

- CENTER is designed around a 5-week curriculum that includes participatory learning such as open discussions, small group work, and role-play scenarios in addition to lecture and printed materials.

- A lot of times you will hear from someone involved in an escalating conflict that “I had no choice!”. Any curriculum teaching how to better manage conflict and work towards resolution must be based on the humanist “assumption that human beings have the potential for growth and development and that people are free to make choices and determine their behavior” (Merriam & Bierema, p.29) otherwise it would make no difference. Furthermore, as this theory states, learning is a process – it takes time, commitment, and being intentional to unlearn or change behaviors that have been reinforced over the time.

- From personal experience working in the field, I have learned that conflict resolution training is best when it is experiential and embodied learning experience. This view seems to be in line with currently practices in the field as per Lewicki (2002), “Current conflict resolution teaching and training relies on experiential learning...we propose that effective training...is directed at each of the four elements” - concrete experiences, observation and reflection, formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and active experimentation. Hands on practice activities such as role-plays and case studies have students study concrete experiences and provide them with the opportunity to observe and reflect on their own experiences and behavior, as well as form new concepts about conflict and how to resolve it. These new concepts as well as the opportunity to experiment with different approaches and behaviors can transform their existing world view and how they interact with others.

- While we largely think about conflict as solely a cognitive process, learning to respond and manage conflict and to communicate effectively requires a holistic approach. Participants must understand what conflict is and where it comes from (Cognitive Domain) and the feelings it brings up for them and others (Affective Domain) to be able to learn and apply conflict resolution skills (Psychomotor Domain) successfully. Instruction must be structure to address all three domains expressed in Bloom’s Taxonomy for the behavior shift to be successful and the transfer of skills to occur.

**Evaluation:** Evaluation will be designed based on the Kirkpatrick model and focus primarily at Level 1 – Reaction and Level 2 – Learning. Level one evaluations will be conducted at the end of each session and will provide feedback as to whether participants find the content is relevant and effective. Level two evaluations will take place throughout the
program by having the instructors and dedicated coaches come assist participants in activities by providing in the moment feedback and guidance.

References


CC-Prep: https://www.ccprep-academy.org/


